RISE AND SHINE

January 5, 1986, 11:00 a. m. Worship Service

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"Arise, shine; for your light has come."
--Isaiah 60:1a (RSV)

Scripture
Psalm 72:1-14
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

The New Year has always held a kind of mystique for me. As a child, I was never quite sure what exactly was happening. I knew that the calendar changed and that I would have to learn to say and write a new number to designate the year. I knew that everyone worked very hard at celebrating New Year's Eve. I rather enjoyed the opportunity to stay up and join in whatever it was that was transpiring. I asked my father once what really was going on, and how did we really know that one year was ending and another beginning, and how one could tell when the exact moment occurred. He explained that if I looked out the window--and if I watched very carefully--I would see that space between the years go whistling by. I watched for that space several years. In a sense, I guess I still do, still wondering what really is happening at midnight.

In the past, the overwhelming spirit of the event has been celebrative, positive, optimistic. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote a poem which was put to music in the last century, and it is the only New Year's hymn I know. It expresses the traditional reasons why people celebrate the New Year:

"Ring out, wild bells, to a wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night,
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

"Ring out the old, ring in the new.
Ring happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go.
Ring out the false, ring in the true."

That's quite an assertion when you ponder it a bit--the past is false, or at least obsolete. Truth will be found in the future. Tennyson's promise sounds almost florid to us now in its rosy optimism about the future:

"Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.
Ring out the thousand years of war,
Ring in the thousand years of peace."

Thd poet captured, in those words, the universal optimism of the day. Indeed, that optimism is at the heart of American culture. Western democracy is founded on the conviction that human history is a progression, a noble quest; that things are getting better, and that the future will be a better time, in every way, than the past. That is why the passing of time and the changing of the year have been regarded as worth celebrating, not mourning.

As we celebrated New Year's recently, however, it may be that Ogden Nash, not Alfred Lord Tennyson, is the poet who best captures the spirit of the time.

Nash wrote, one December 31--

"Hark, it's midnight, children dear,
Duck! Here comes another year."

As I read the year-end review of the events that made news in 1985, the acts of violent terrorism, the natural disasters and plane crashes, the continuing stalemate in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the escalating violence in South Africa, the dilemma in the Philippines and Nicaragua and El Salvador--none of which show signs of peaceful and happy resolution, it occurred to me that Nash, not Tennyson, speaks for and to the hour. Prudence would seem to dictate looking for cover.

There is, in fact, a growing sense in the scholarly community that a fundamental change has happened in the way we regard the future.

Until now, as far as anyone knows, all the generations of Americans before us assumed that the future would be better than the past. In the past several years, that has altered. The economists have warned us that economic growth--extending into infinity--is not a reasonable assumption. The environmentalists have warned us and we have discovered in the past decade, the simple fact that there are limits--population limits, resource limits, ecological limits.*

*symbolized by those last pathetic condors we must capture and cage in hopes of saving them from ourselves.

Meanwhile we have discovered that the position of absolute preeminance we have enjoyed since World War II is now over. We have to live in a world which often seems to regard us as threat, not friend. As a result, the majority of young people today, public opinion pollsters tell us, believe that their lives will not be as good as the lives of their parents. Even more distressing, a majority of people in high school several years ago indicated their assumption that they would die, not of natural causes, but in a nuclear war.

Listen to Lewis Thomas, not at all a political radical, but a wise, perceptive Doctor-scientist. His last book was Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. That symphony is about death and it is moving and strong and deep and assuring. Thomas used to love it, but no more, because of his sense of universal death--the death of all. "How do the young stand it?" he asks, "while those things are still in place, aimed everywhere, ready for launching..." "If I were sixteen or seventeen, I think I would begin, perhaps very slowly and imperceptivly, to go crazy." (p. 166)

We are so close, this wise scientist teaches, to a future that can be full and rich and glorious for humankind. "Provided we do not kill ourselves off. At this early stage in our evolution...what our species needs most of all right now, is simply a future." (p. 62)

What bothers Thomas and many other social scientists is hopelessness about the future. When we feel hopeless we accommodate our thinking too easily to the idea of nuclear war, and compromise our hopes and expect it to happen, and before you know it--or as the fear goes--we are behaving in ways that make our hopelessness self-fulfilling.

The fact that 1985 ended without a shooting war between major world powers is worth celebrating. But how easily we have accommodated our thinking, our world view, our future, to the permanent existence of weapons capable of ending all life.

In his classic, the Theology of Hope, Juergen Moltmann wrote: "The other side of pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia, melancholy.... Temptation consists not so much of the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us." (p. 22)

Fundamental theological questions always leap out of any consideraiton of the future. Is there a sovereign God who has anything to do with the possibilities ahead of us? Are we saying that we are alone? that the fate of the race is in our hands? that God has no control, power, or influence over how things will turn out?

We have just celebrated our answer to those difficult questions--at Christmas. Today is Epiphany Sunday. There is no historical evidence for it but church tradition has always celebrated the arrival of the Magi at Bethlehem, following their star, twelve days after Christmas. Tomorrow is "Twelfth Night," the official end of Christmastide, by the way the church keeps time. It's symbols are that mysterious star, the Magi and their curious pilgrimage and that deeper Biblical assertion, that God, in sovereign freedom, chooses all sorts of interesting ways to work His will in human history.

The Magi were drawn into an unknown and risky future by the light of that star. Their part in the Christmas story reminds us that to celebrate the birth is to be called to a journey--into a similar future...risky and unknown, but one which promises God's presence. In fact, sometimes the promise is clearest when things look most dismal.

A prophet wrote a letter one-half century before Christ to a group of people for whom the future could not look more dismal. "Rise, shine, your light has come," he wrote. A generation before they had been captured as their nation was defeated and overrun by the Babylonians. The victors had carried them off to Babylon to live under virtual house arrest, and then devised a subtle but effective form of non-violent genocide. Instead of slave labor and concentration camps, the people of Israel in Babylonian captivity were welcomed, invited and encouraged to settle in, get jobs, participate in the culture, intermarry, invest in the community, worship Babylonian gods. As a new generation was born and matured, a generation of adults who had never been in Judah, had never seen the Temple, the Babylonian idea of cultural assimilation began to make sense. The Jews were in danger of disappearing.

The prophet who wrote to the community of Jews in Babylonian exile made an astonishing assertion. He looked around the world of the Middle East, a world remarkablly similar to ours, and observed political ferment in Persia. He had the audacity to see in the Persian Emperor, Cyrus the Great, an instrument of God's will. He had the greater audacity to suggest that

the sovereign God was about to redeem his people and Cyrus would be the means. He was no pollyanna. His image of Judah as a violated woman, lying in the street, is harsh. It is to that woman, however, that he addresses the words: "Arise, shine, for your light has come." Her children are returning, her poverty will become wealth. At the very moment when things could not look worse, the prophet suggests that God is active, present and doing something creatively redemptive for his people within the larger events occurring around them. And that they, in the middle of their gloomy exile, have a responsibility for their own future. The time for inert mourning and fretting is over. It is time to Rise and Shine!

That is quite a claim. The prophet is working out the distinctive theology of Judaism and Christianity: namely, that God is God: that God is not dead when His people are defeated: that God's will is majestic and mysterious and that nothing in history will thwart it forever; and that God will use the events of human history and the people of human history to redeem and reconcile and bring his Kingdom into the future. The claim is personal as well as global. Nothing that happens in our lives will separate us from God's love.

That is what happened in Bethlehem. GOD USED HUMAN HISTORY. God made his grand entry onto the stage of history through the totally human event of birth. It is precisely when human history is not doing so well on its own, when the human spirit is sagging, when things do not look so good--that the message of Christmas makes the most sense--and is most clearly heard and understood.

Christmas Eve 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in a Nazi prison. He wrote words there that are important for us to hear now.

> " For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I dare say that it will have more meaning and be celebrated with greater sincerity here than in the places where all that survives of the feast is its name...that God should come down to the very place which men usually abhor, that Christ was born in a stable...these are the things a prisoner can understand better than anyone else. For him the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense." Letters and Papers From Prison (p. 77-78)

the promise of Christmas is not that God will intercede and make things right. Bonhoeffer knew Nazis would execute him. The realities of life in 1986 remain: "Those things," as Thomas calls them, are still aimed everywhere...." Rather, the word here is a promise of God's creative, redemptive presence in the future--and a summons to "Rise and shine," to get up and get on with it.

It is a particular word to the Christian Church in a world desperately in need of intelligent hope. Moltmann writes: "This hope makes the Christian Church a constant disturbance in human society...the source of continued new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future to come...." (p. 22)

The very essence of the birth--and the mystery of the incarnation is that God makes people responsible for the future. In the most radical possible, God put his own future on the line. We are given freedom regarding God's own Son, to welcome him or ignore him. And regarding human history, we are given freedom to extend it creatively and responsibly--or to end it.

The stakes are high. We can blow up the whole place. God will not bail us out.

"If we fail" Matthew Fox wrote recently, "it will be because we did not believe....We did not believe we were creators...we did not believe that heaven had begun. And fullness...and divinity...our own. The new was too good." A Spirituality Named Compassion (p. 269-70)

Or when "those things" are aimed, or the terrorists attack, or your dearest love dies, or the test comes back and the news is bad, or when the dream ends and the future looks dark.

The story never wears out because it makes the most important promise in the world; namely, that God comes into creation, and into human life; quietly but surely: that God will live life with us, stand with us, and give us strength, courage and faith as we need them. The promise is that God will be in whatever future there is and that, therefore, we can walk into it--courageously, head high, briskly, almost jauntily.

I do not say that lightly. Nor does the Bible. Hope in the Bible emerges out of exile and suffering, and, finally, from a manager behind the inn. The future may not evolve the way we would design it. Tragedy may happen--sickness, death, pain, loneliness, depression--some of us may walk through all of it in 1986. All of us will walk through some of it. The promise is of One who will be in it with us, Who is sovereign Love, Who loves us and Who will never let us go.

Rise--Shine--Because of the star, because of the promise, because it is God's future -- we can, without fear or hesitation, ring out the old and ring in the new. Our light has come indeed.

God of all time and eternity, as a New Year begins, we commit ourselves, our present and our future, to you. Call out of us the steady faith of your people in the past. Help us to see your hand at work in the world, and to trust your providence. Lord of all, we thank you for the promise that you will be with us in the future. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen